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Librarians As Environmental Activists

Librarians are sometimes thought to be classic passive resources—seen and not heard—peacefully waiting for their clientele to approach. Incentive is supposed to come from users while librarians wait to serve. Therefore much librarianship seems devoted to preparing to satisfy people who may show up on their own. Whatever degree of validity this view has for most libraries, it is unacceptable for environmental libraries and for environmental collections in general libraries. These libraries and collections cannot be wallflowers. The passive view makes too little of them. The rest of the papers for this conference deal with the passive functions of environmental libraries; I will deal with some of the important active functions.

THE SETTING

Environmental quality is a creature, and occasionally a victim, of decisions made at many levels of government and in the private sector. These include decisions to do things, and to not do things. Virtually everything that government does affects the environment: such major activities as highway and dam construction, and some less visible functions such as purchasing. The vast regulatory functions of governments affect many private activities which in turn affect the environment.

Private decisions have the potential for significant environmental impact. The most visible are decisions to build on the landscape or to change it. Decisions to locate power plants, to build in flood plains, to strip mine, and to undertake major residential or industrial development, all have significant impact on the environment. Many conflicts between ambitious plans and environmental preservation cannot be resolved. We cannot both industrialize our river banks and save them; we cannot both live in electrified luxury and

avoid the environmental impact of more and bigger power plants; and we cannot both enjoy the benefits of some pesticides and avoid their destructive side effects.

Many conflicts can be resolved. Where these possibilities exist, they are often not realized, mainly because many decisions are ill-informed. While occasionally the ignorance of the decision-maker is a conscious, studied effort to avoid the truth, our experience in government suggests that more often ignorance is accidental. Decision-makers usually have no convenient way of learning about or access to information resources.

Government has developed procedures for curing some of these problems. The National Environmental Policy Act, adopted in 1969, requires a detailed environmental impact statement before certain decisions significantly affecting the environment can take effect.¹ State laws passed in the last two years in Illinois have similar requirements.² In response to such requirements, a relatively careful study of many factors is now undertaken before decisions are made.

Similarly, private developers whose financing and profits depend upon an efficient and predictable flow of events take great pains to avoid environmental opposition and controversy in their activities. Although no statutory compulsion requires environmental impact analysis, in many cases of purely private action there is a sensitivity to environmental issues in the early planning process because of the need to avoid the delays associated with conflicts over environmental values.

Experience in the Illinois Institute for Environmental Quality, with both public and private agencies in the environmental impact business, is that the flow of information necessary to do a good job on these statements is not all that it should be. The IIEQ is the principal state government resource for assisting other agencies with environmental impact analysis. It has worked on such major projects as the new East St. Louis airport and power plant sitings. It has also developed tools for analysis of new highways and transportation systems, and advised many agencies with respect to compliance with Illinois environmental impact analysis requirements.

We see two classes of problems: (1) the task is so great that most agencies cannot always do an adequate job; and (2) even when a good job is attempted, the shortage and inaccessibility of information resources is critical. Often this is because the state of the art in the relevant fields does not permit adequate analysis. We have repeatedly found, however, that the problem is lack of knowledge of or access to existing materials.

Members of public and citizens groups who have assumed substantial responsibility for policing this process also have poor access to information resources. One result is that the procedures which are designed to maximize the utilization of available information succeed only in revealing the lack of use of such information.

Many decisions affecting the environment occur in settings in which substantial resources are not available for detailed and careful research programs. Local zoning decisions, a variety of state decisions on the environment, and many low-visibility decisions in the federal government, simply do not benefit from the kind of detailed study which now must accompany major undertakings.

The final environmental impact statement for the East St. Louis airport covers hundreds of pages, took more than a year to complete, and cost nearly \$100,000; power plant statements weigh several pounds and require similar resources. Clearly, most activity does not receive this kind of attention. If it did, we would soon be faced with a chronic shortage of analysts, scientists, ecologists, and other experts needed to do the job properly. It is a problem of allocation of scarce resources, lack of time, and relative lack of importance of the decisions. A complete and thorough study cannot be done on every decision made by every government. Thus, the major thorough study resources are reserved for the major decisions.

Many private decisions which affect the environment are made by people who do not have the resources to do an adequate job. For example, an adequate environmental analysis of proposed strip mining under Illinois's new strip mine law is well within the reach of a major coal company, but not of a small family-owned and operated quarry. A major power company can afford the cost of massive, even scholarly, environmental analysis, but a small foundry cannot. In the absence of a subsidized information resource, the job will be incompletely done. The alternative is to put small quarry operators and small companies out of business, which is neither desirable nor probable.

Where an intensive analysis is beyond reach, the best job possible with available resources should be done. This often means use of reports, books, periodicals, research documents, government publications, and all of the other things which librarians gather and keep.

Many decisions affecting the environment are made at many points in and out of government without adequate access to environmental information. Librarians and information officers have a responsibility to improve the information base for these decisions. Librarians can abandon their neutrality and work for the active use of their resources; they can work to break down barriers to release of information; and they can make their presence known to decision-makers in such a way that the existence of the library serves as a deterrent to irresponsible decisions.

ACTIVE USE OF ENVIRONMENTAL INFORMATION RESOURCES

Traditionally, information centers are neutral turf. Particularly in the case of public and academic libraries, users expect the library to stay out of contro-

versy. The common pose of libraries and librarians is low profile, aloof from the fray and far away from controversy. Librarians should not be proponents of particular ideas in the materials which their libraries store. Neutrality with respect to ideas is an important value and essential to the utility of the library in the processes of decision-making. But one idea deserves the active sponsorship of the librarian. It is the idea that the materials housed within the facility ought to be used, and used often and well. The librarian should be a clear proponent of this position.

On the issue of active use of the facility, neutrality is neither possible nor sensible. In the first place, what passes for neutrality really is not. A passive stance, waiting with the doors open for users to arrive to make what use they will of the facility, is not neutral at all. It places the librarian's thumb on the scale in favor of the people who are aware of the facility and know how to use it. There is nothing neutral about operating a departmental library about which some people are fully informed, and others are not; the well-informed will use it, and the others will not.

Even assuming that neutrality were possible, it is still unacceptable. When decisions are being made on the basis of inadequate information, the librarian's passive role is irresponsible. The same zeal which is often reserved for insuring that borrowed materials are returned on time can be turned toward insuring that borrowable materials are in fact borrowed. An active role, focused on active use of the materials housed within the library, can improve the quality of environmental decision-making. This is easier for special libraries housed in active organizations. The challenge is somewhat greater for the academic or public library. Without taking sides on the substance of decisions made by their users, librarians can work to insure that decisions made by people who might use the library are made only after the library is used.

Libraries owned by decision-making agencies have a natural constituency to serve. For them, the responsibility is to insure that their sponsors make maximum use of the facility. The decision-making process might include a check by the librarian that all that is relevant is affirmatively called to the attention of the decision-maker. No librarian can insure that materials made available are in fact used. But the librarian can insure that relevant materials are made available and that decision-makers, to ignore them, must actively decide to ignore them.

Libraries which do not have ready-made constituencies, such as academic and public libraries, have a different responsibility. They must seek out users and actively serve them. Zoning boards, local government bodies, state governments, private developers, and others who affect the environment should be reached and actively encouraged to make use of what the library has to offer. Waiting for the library telephone to ring is a failure to serve. Decision-makers, particularly at the local government level, must be helped to want to use the

library, and then to use it. Academic libraries have the same duty to participate in decision-making by seeking users. Institutions of higher learning in Illinois have an uneven record of serving government. But where they serve, they serve well and improve the functioning of government as no other resource can. The role of academic libraries in the governing process is largely unexplored. The initiative must come from the libraries.

Librarians have the skill to do things which are not conveniently done elsewhere. The library in the IIEQ provides bibliographies, literature searches, summaries of materials, and other helpful aids which make mounds of technical material readily usable in the decision-making process. The storage of materials and their cataloging, while important steps to insure access, are not enough. Most of the decision-makers whom libraries serve have neither the resources nor the time to undertake a major thorough research project in support of every decision which they make. They need digested material which librarians can provide.

The librarian cannot take the place of a professional research analyst. He cannot substitute his expertise in information resource handling for the substantive expertise contained in the materials. Nor can he pose as a scientist or expert. He can find, organize, condense and abstract materials, and make them available. This is something which librarians must do if they are to improve the work of the people who affect the environment.

Librarians often hesitate to venture into controversial areas, but that reluctance affects the impact of their work. By staying out of the controversy over whether their libraries should be used, librarians miss opportunities to affect important environmental results. By extending the notion of neutrality to cover the issue of whether the resources are used at all, librarians take a position on a controversial issue of public importance.

Environmental quality decisions must be improved. During the last four years in Illinois, partly through the work of the IIEQ, the quality of these decisions has been improved. Such successes would have been impossible without the studied activism of the Institute's library facility, and other information resources styled after library facilities. It is impossible for society to make environmentally correct decisions, and avoid environmental mistakes, unless the people who control and manage information resources emerge from behind their desks and actively fight for their utility and importance.

FREE FLOW OF INFORMATION

Librarians, more than most people, have a duty to insure the free flow of information. The practice among some producers of information is rather restrictive. Documents containing useful data and information sometimes are withheld from public view, or even the view of government. Such barriers must fall if environmental decisions are to be well-informed. The federal

Freedom of Information Act³ provides for relatively expansive opening of the files of government agencies. With some exceptions, it orders broad public access to agency materials. The Illinois Environmental Protection Act provides for the files, records, and data of the state's environmental agencies to be "open to reasonable public inspection."⁴ I do not know of any reluctance by any agency in the Illinois program to comply with the letter and spirit of this provision. No formal complaints have been filed and all requests have been satisfied. The federal government, however, has been the target of many suits to force disclosure of information under the Freedom of Information Act. Furthermore, we in the Illinois environmental program have experienced difficulties in extracting environmental research results and other data from federal agencies.

Librarians can be among the most effective workers for opening up their own organizations. They can use their considerable internal influence to persuade the people with the keys to information to unlock the barriers to entry and scrutiny. Litigation under appropriate statutes has its place. But internal pressure by information and library officers is likely to produce better results. Lawsuits can never cover the entire range of secret data. They are costly and time-consuming.

People within agencies are well placed to analyze their agency's public access rules; librarians are often charged with enforcing them. They can use their position and influence to break down the obstacles to full disclosure of useful materials. Librarians have a similar duty with respect to agencies and organizations other than their own. On many occasions, the librarian of the IIEQ has been the cutting edge with which state-government has gained access to remote or hidden materials. Librarians have a role to play as guardians against censorship. Their business is the free flow of information. It is not enough to celebrate that goal through traditional librarians' devices, such as bigger and better catalogs and longer hours.

Some bureaucracies tend to polish the negative out of their work product. As work of significance rises through the many stages of review of a large organization—whether or not in government—information which may be thought to be threatening can be honed away. Librarians can work to maximize openness. Duties of loyalty and law prevent open defiance of decisions to withhold materials or edit them. That imposes an even greater burden on the insiders to advocate openness on behalf of a constituency which has no other voice inside.

PROMOTING BETTER DECISIONS

The content of an environmental library is less important than its existence. Bureaucratic decision-making is characterized by a strong will to survive. Survival is best insured if the amount of criticism and challenge is reduced. A principal effect of the National Environmental Policy Act has been a vast

improvement in the environmental sensitivity in agency decisions. It is a result which grows, in part, from the desire of low-level decision-makers and their chiefs to be free of controversy to the extent possible.

Controversy presupposes an informed complainer. Bureaucrats tend to ignore the angry, but uninformed, objector to proposed action. Although that is a serious error, it appears to be a common one. To the extent that government behavior responds to the threat of informed objection, it is the threat that is the operative agent of control. More specifically, it is the probability that criticism will be informed criticism that causes a significant impact on the decision-making process.

A library which is good enough and open enough to supply the basis for informed comment is a powerful place. Its power derives not from the use that is actually made of it, but from the use which might be made of it. In the process, a great deal of noisy opposition and cumbersome litigation may be avoided. The quality of decisions will be improved. For such influence to be felt, the library or information facility must be credible. It need not have its bluff—if it is a bluff—called often to have an impact on virtually everything that goes on in its organization.

We have such a facility in the IIEQ. A later paper in this volume by Angela Imberman, the excellent creator of the facility, provides some detail. My job requires me to assist other agencies in their confrontations with environmental problems. Our very credible library is a lever within the state bureaucracy on behalf of environmentally sensitive results. Based on my observations, I think that our library's greatest impact has been in its presence, rather than its actual use.

For the last several years, the IIEQ has participated in many attempts to reform state government and increase its sensitivity to environmental information and values as decisions are made. That experience leads me to conclude that many environmental mistakes are accidents. They arise from the lack of adequate information. We have learned that some relatively simple devices can substantially reduce the number of mistakes. The IIEQ has published an Illinois data catalog which describes and locates data files concerning the state which are collected by a variety of state, local, and federal agencies. In talking to users of the catalog, we have found that information which has not been used in the past is now used and, in fact, changes decisions.

Most librarians have had the experience of satisfying a request for relevant information from somebody about to make an important decision. The feeling is one of immense satisfaction of having improved a result. Ad hoc victories of that sort can be systematized in order that hundreds of decisions made in and out of government will be better informed than they are today. Reliance on complex procedures, such as those provided under the National Environmental Policy Act, has its grace. The success of that act, and laws like it, cannot be denied. But these are cumbersome, expensive, and not wholly effective tools.

The process itself must be reformed, and that is the kind of job which is done best from the inside.

Relatively few insiders have the same singleness of purpose that librarians have. They, almost alone in the organization, carry the message that information is a good thing and ought to be used. Without violating confidences or loyalties, librarians can materially change the quality of the work done by their constituencies. But that requires an active commitment to the goal, and a strategy carefully pursued. No librarian can be content to open the shelves in the morning and beg borrowers to return the books. Opportunities are lost every day while librarians overlook their duties to improve information use. I think librarians can change this pattern of passiveness, and I think they should.

REFERENCES

1. 42 U.S.C. §4321, 4331-35, 4341-47. (P.L. 91-190)
2. E.g., *Illinois Revised Statutes*. Illinois Environmental Protection Act, Ch. 111-1/2, §1047 (B); Illinois Surface Mined Land Conservation Act, Ch. 93, §205.
3. 5 U.S.C. §552.
4. *Illinois Revised Statutes*, *op. cit.*, Ch. 111-1/2, §1007.